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The Evolution of a Revolutionary: William Morales

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By David Hessekiel

With the capture last spring of fugitive bombmaker William Morales by Mexican police, officials responsible for combating the Puerto Rican Armed Forces of National Liberation started breathing a little easier. Law enforcement officers have called the FALN, the Spanish acronym by which the group is known, the most dangerous terrorist organization operating in the United States today.

"The whole world knows that Puerto Rico is a direct colony of the United States," Morales said in September at the start of a series of interviews with Newsday. "The FALN acts under international law...We are not terrorists; we are a national liberation group."

Before Morales' May 26 capture in the small city of Puebla, no U.S. lawman was known to have laid eyes on him since May 21, 1979. On that day, he escaped from a guarded room in New York's Bellevue Hospital, in spite of having lost nearly all of his fingers in an accidental 1978 explosion.

Mexican police held Morales incommunicado—Morales says they tortured him—for five days before he was officially arraigned. The United States requested Morales' extradition to serve an 89-year prison sentence, but six months later the East Harlem native is still a prisoner in the modern Northern Prison on the dusty outskirts of the capital.

Graphic by Jim McManus/Hermes

Morales was allowed to speak to reporters when he was first jailed in May. His allegations of torture received so much attention, however, that prison officials soon limited his contact with the press. *Newsday* was able, however, to conduct interviews with Morales this fall during pauses in his courtroom appearances and once over lunch within the prison walls.

Although Morales' case is being handled in the courts, diplomatic observers here believe the ultimate decision on his extraditions will be more political than juridical. The possibilities are: extraditing him, jailing him in Mexico for crimes linked to his arrest or—as Morales has petitioned—granting him asylum as a persecuted Puerto Rican freedom fighter. Mexico has a long tradition of welcoming political refugees such as exiles from Franco's Spain and, more recently, South and Central American leftists.

"If I'm sent back, boom! I'm in jail," Morales said.

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"Maybe they'll kill me, but I'm ready for that. What I'm worried about is the precedent that would set. All of the dictators of Latin America will use that precedent to get at their enemies in Mexico. What makes this case more complicated is the fact that it is against the U.S., the country that controls Mexico economically."

Dressed in a khaki prison uniform, Morales freely listed legal and political arguments for FALN actions but seemed much less comfortable when the abstrations were dropped and discussion turned to the personal factors that led him to "take up arms," and to the blood spilled by the FALN: Since 1974, its bombings of public buildings have killed six persons and injured hundreds.

What emerges from Morales' personal recollections is the story of a poor Puerto Rican boy born and reared in East Harlem; a student caught up in the political activism of the 1960's; and a young man willing to use violent methods to fight for a homeland he first saw when he was in his 20's.

At 33, Morales is an intense but amiable man who is more familiar with New York City than with San Juan. The graying radical speaks better English than Spanish, and speaks both with a New York accent.

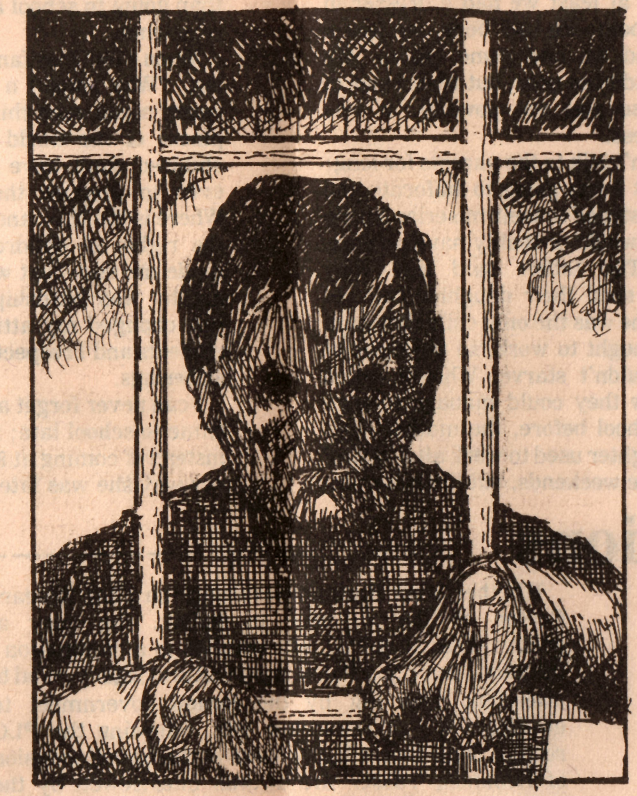
Morales admitted he participated in FALN bombings in the mid-1970's but refused to disclose any information on the clandestine organization's workings. His reactions to sensitive questions such as "How did you learn to make bombs?" or "Who helped you when you were underground?" ranged from a coy smile and silence to a snarl and angry outburst. Even his leftist Mexican lawyers have been kept in the dark concerning his underground activities. "Once I innocently asked him if he knew a certain part of Mexico City," recalled one lawyer, "and he told me not to try to force information out of him."

From behind the bars and glass of the courthouse prisoner pen, Morales' disfigurement from the July 12, 1978, explosion of a pipe bomb he was making is not so obvious. Up close it is. His lower lip, almost torn off by the blast, is thick with scars and turned down into a grimace on the right side. Bluish dots of impregnated black powder pepper his ears and cheeks. A jigsaw pattern of white scars covers his chin.

The hands that he now admits once fashioned bombs are no more than stumps. Except for the bottom parts of his left thumb and index finger, his fingers were blown off entirely in the Elmhurst, Queens, apartment where he was making a pipe bomb.

"I had to teach myself to eat, to dress myself, to tie my shoes, to write," he recalled. "I got very little therapy when I was in jail." With a rubber band stretched between the remnants of his two fingers, he can hold a fork or a pen.

Morales refers to himself as a revolutionary and speaks without bitterness of "the sacrifices a revolutionary is willing to make." For example, he said he is glad that neither he nor his wife, Dylcia Pagan, who is imprisioned in Illinois, knows the whereabouts of their



son, so that the authorities could not use the boy as a lever to gain information from them.

Born on Feb. 7, 1950, William Morales is the first of three sons of Lucy Corea, a Puerto Rican immigrant who went to New York in the late 1940's in search of work. Interviewed on a hot August afternoon in her apartment in an East Harlem housing project, Mrs. Corea called her eldest boy "a quiet kid, a good son and a good student."

No one in the family was involved in politics before William, his mother said. "I had no idea he was in the FALN before his accident," she said. "I don't know what made him so political." Yet she vocally supports him at pro-independence groups' rallies and reunions. "William is a patriot and a fighter for what he believes in, not a terrorist," Mrs. Corea said.

"When we were growing up my Mom was tough," Morales recalled. "If school was open you went, even if there was snow on the ground. When you came home you did your homework. If it wasn't for her, my brothers [Raymond, 30, and Henry, 21] and I would have ended up addicts in the streets."

What William's mother could not do for him was shut out the pressures of New York City. "In the schools we were taught that we are all Americans, that we all benefit from the Bill of Rights," Morales said. "That's very philosophical. But you quickly learn that it's not that way in daily life."

If a Puerto Rican was riding with friends in Central Park, he said, "cops would stop you to see if you had stolen the bike." Just because you were Puerto Rican, he said, "people would look at you as if you were going to mug them."

Late in his teens, Morales encountered more serious problems. "A friend who went to Vietnam clean came back to the States a drug addict...He committed suicide by jumping off a 16-story project," Morales said. "...I saw friends—not girlfriends—hooked on drugs turn to prostitution...They'd sell themselves for $2 just to buy a $2 bag."

Morales entered City College in the fall of 1968 and was quickly caught up in student activism. Most of his energy went into a nonviolent Puerto Rican independence group. "I got very involved in the movements, organizing rallies, going to meetings," he said. "There wasn't enough time for studying. I dropped out after a year and a half." In 1971 Morales enrolled in the School of Visual Arts, from which he received a film-making degree after five years split between study and part-time jobs.

By reading Franz Fanon and other radical theorists and discussing them with other young Puerto Ricans, Morales developed a new world view: "You learn that violence is not just a policeman with a stick hitting yu over the head. It's hunger, racism, unemployment, drug addiction—the products of the capitalist system."

Studying Puerto Rican history led Morales to believe that his people needed an independent homeland. "The United States violently entered Puerto Rico in 1898 with their cannons," he said. "...I read history and saw that we had tried all peaceful means. Elections,

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demonstrations, going to international court, each action was met with violent repression."

In 1975 a member of the FALN, whom Morales won't name, "popped the question: 'Are you willing to take up arms for the liberation of Puerto Rico?' " Morales was. "It's all voluntary," he said. "I joined up."

Most FALN members know only three to five people in their cells. That secrecy has severely limited the ability of U.S. law enforcement officials to predict or prevent FALN bombings—more than 100 have been attributed to the group since it surfaced in 1974. "Every time they arrest leaders they say they have broken the back of the FALN," Morales said. "But soon after, we come back."

"We are largely left to reacting," conceded Kenneth Walton, FBI deputy assistant director and head of the FBI/New York Police Department Terrorism Task Force.

"We love peace, we have no desire to place bombs in buildings or kill."

Little is known about Morales' place in the FALN structure—and Morales isn't volunteering any information. To Walton, Morales "is just an inept bomb-maker who blew off both of his hands and part of his face." New York City cops have nicknamed Morales "Fingers." "The only thing that made him a semi-folk hero in the terrorist community," Walton said, "is that he escaped and remained a fugitive for four years."

When Walton's comments were read to him, Morales responded: "Who is inept? I was able to escape from a guarded hospital room. More than I wanted to get out of jail—as a revolutionary I am ready to go to jail for the struggle—I wanted to teach the U.S. government a lesson: that our organization is capable of many things, that Puerto Ricans are capable people."

"Ours is a popular movement," he said on a different occasion. "They know that even with all of their money and equipment they can't stop us."

Morales said he expects to see Puerto Rican independence in his lifetime. "The FALN blows up buildings in the night. That is part of our long-term plan," he said. "Right now we are in the armed propaganda stage. The next step is people's war...It could get to the point where you have a Beirut in New York with 'fire' and 'no go' zones."

Although he will not identify the FALN bombings in which he participated, Morales says they have all been justified. "We love peace, we have no desire to place bombs in buildings or kill. The people who have died have died because of the irresponsibility of the police and authorities," he insisted.

The Jan. 24, 1975, bombing—admittedly without warning—of Fraunces Tavern in Lower Manhattan, in which four persons died and more than 50 were injured, was the FALN's bloodiest act. Morales said that the attack preceded his participation in the FALN, but that he would have endorsed it.

Asked to explain the incident, Morales appeared uncomfortable, spoke quickly and stuck closely to the line of argument he said he had heard other FALN members espouse.

"OK, OK, let me explain that," he began. "Two or three weeks before in the town of Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, there was going to be a political rally for Puerto Rican independence. A Cuban exile group planted a bomb in a garbage can...When the rally started the bomb went off killing a man and seriously injuring a 6-year-old child. Our information shows that the Cuban exile group was under the direct control of the CIA.

"I was told that [FALN] members had decided to retaliate...," Morales said. "The bomb was placed in the Anglers Club in Fraunces Tavern, a club for high-ranking executives...Those people are not divorced from U.S. foreign policy, in the same way that an ITT executive is not innocent of what happened in Chile...That way the American government would know that anytime it took violent action against Puerto Rican *independentistas* there would be retaliation. The first blood shed was Puerto Rican."

Contrary to Morales' version, FBI records indicate that the bomb was placed at the foot of a stairway leading up to the Anglers Club and adjacent to a public dining room. "Only one of the four people killed was in the Anglers Club," said FBI New York spokesman Joseph Valiquette. "To set off a bomb at mid-day, the height of the lunch hour, in the financial district, is some indication of the value the FALN places on human life," he said. No one has been arrested in the attack.

Morales said that most FALN bombings are directed against property. "Our attacks are calculated. They are not wanton. Wanton is putting a bomb in a subway car," he said. Those who plant bombs in crowded areas are not responsible for deaths and injuries if their bomb threats are ignored, he argued.

That is the logic Morales used to divert blame for the August, 1977, bombing death of a Mobil Oil executive from the FALN to the young victim's superiors. "We called them up and warned them half an hour before, not five minutes like some other groups, but half an hour," Morales said. "The Mobil executives decided that only senior executives would be evacuated."

A Mobil spokesman declined to comment on Morales' statements. Valiquette said: "To say that by calling up and making a bomb threat one mitigates their responsibility for any injuries the explosion may produce is a bogus argument."

Within a year of the Mobil bombing, Morales himself was injured. "The bomb just went off as I was about to close it," he said. "It was something techinical."

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Unable to connect Morales to any FALN bombings, a federal grand jury indicted him on weapons and reckless endangerment charges. Morales declared himself a prisoner of war, refused to recognize the authority of the court and offered no defense. A federal judge sentenced him to 10 years in prison, and a New York State court convicted Morales on almost identical charges. His sentences are to be served consecutively, yielding a total of up to 89 years behind bars.

It was 335 days into his sentence that Morales escaped from a third-floor prison ward room in the Manhattan hospital, making his way to the street down a chain of bandages. "All I can say is that it was well planned and well done," he said with a grin.

Although Morales' case is being handled in the courts, diplomatic observers believe the ultimate decision on his extradition will be more political than juridicial.

Mexican police records—purportedly based on statements Morales made during the period he was held incommunicado and alleges he was tortured—indicate that the fugitive entered Mexico in the summer of 1980 through El Paso, Texas, after spending time in New Jersey, Milwaukee and Chicago safe houses. The interrogation report states that Morales was housed by leftists in the northern state of Chihuahua through March, 1983. Morales denies police accusations that he was linked to Mexican guerrilla groups before his capture.

In April, 1983, Morales moved south to the town of Cholula—possibly to receive plastic surgery in nearby Mexico City—with a couple he had befriended in Chihuahua.

The beginning of the end of his life undergound occurred May 21 when Morales called a Chicago FALN supporter from a pay phone in Puebla. The FBI was listening in on the Chicago end. On the basis of that call, the FBI alerted Mexican police that Morales would be at the same phone exchange May 26 and requested his arrest.

Two Mexico City police officers were sent to Puebla. When they entered the phone exchange, Morales was seated with a Mexican companion, Adalberto Villafranco, at a table by the entrance. The Mexican drew a handgun and began shooting. The officers returned fire. When the shooting stopped, Villafranco and one of the officers lay dying, the other officer was wounded, and Morales—who escaped harm by dropping to the floor—was under arrest.

Half a year later, Morales seems to have grown accustomed to prison life. With the money he receives from supporters in the United States, he can eat decent meals in the prison's simple privately run restaurant. At last word, he was still in solitary confinement—prison authorities were ignoring a court order to move him to a normal cell—but in recent months he has been allowed more free time in the yard. He says that from time to time he is illegally interrogated but that he has not been physically tortured since May. He said prison guards verbally abuse him often trying to pressure him into a bribe, but that is a common complaint of inmates in the Northern Prison.

And he expresses no regrets. "A revolutionary is prepared for this and worse. I've never said 'I've had it,' " Morales said. ■